

Changes in Heat Surveillance for 1997

Diane C. Rackers
Office of Epidemiology

The Department of Health has been encouraged by the National Weather Service to consider changing the terms used in heat advisory and surveillance activities. The media were confused when the Department of Health would issue a heat warning or heat **alert** while at the same time the National Weather Service was issuing a heat **advisory**. It was apparent that some consistency in terms was needed. Also, the department had noticed that they had received more media calls when they issued a statewide heat warning (the first phase of its heat advisories) on June 21 than when it issued a statewide heat alert (the second phase of its heat advisories) on July 18. This alerted the department to the need to consider reversing the terms used. (Definitions for heat advisories issued by the Department of Health in 1996 can be found in the sidebar on page 6.)

The terms **Heat Watch**, **Heat Advisory** and **Heat Warning** are usually thought of as weather terms associated with the National Weather Service. Their definitions for these terms are specific to weather conditions and do not take health factors into consideration. See sidebar above right. It seemed appropriate that the Department of Health should use terms that call attention to the health effects of heat. This would allow the media and the public to easily differentiate between heat advisories issued by the National Weather Service and those issued by the Department of Health.

After some discussion, the Department of Health has modified its policy for prevention of heat-related illness and death to use the following terms: **Hot Weather Health Advisory**, **Hot Weather Health Warning** and **Hot Weather Health Emergency**. See sidebar at right. We are encouraging other public health officials throughout the state to use these or similar terms in their heat-related illness prevention activities.

National Weather Service Stages of Heat Advisories

Heat Watch: Excessive heat expected to develop within the next 24-36 hour timeframe.

Heat Advisory: Daytime Heat Index (HI) reaches 105°F for a minimum of 3 hours, and the nighttime minimum HI does not go below 80°F.

Heat Warning: Daytime Heat Index (HI) reaches 115°F for a minimum of three hours, and the nighttime minimum does not go below 80°F.

Department of Health Stages of Hot Weather Health Advisories for 1997

A statewide **Hot Weather Health Advisory** will be issued when heat indexes of 105° in a large proportion of the state are first reached (or predicted). The Department of Health will inform the public about the risks of heat-related illness and urge concern for those at high risk. Monitoring of temperatures and heat indexes will be intensified. An **Advisory** will not be canceled.

A statewide **Hot Weather Health Warning** will be issued when:

1. Heat indexes, measured at peak afternoon temperatures, have remained at 105° or more for two days in a large proportion of the state **and**
2. When weather predictions are for continued high-stress conditions for at least 48 hours in a large proportion of the state.

During a **Warning**, the Department of Health will encourage local health departments to assure that cooling shelters are available and also encourage other community agencies to provide relief from the heat stress. A **Warning** will be downgraded or canceled when heat indexes in a large proportion of the state fall below 105° for 48 hours and the forecast is for 48–72 hours of continued relief from heat stress.

The Department of Health will recommend to the Governor that a statewide **Hot Weather Health Emergency** be declared when:

1. Extensive areas of the state are experiencing high and sustained levels of heat stress (determined when the heat index reaches 105° for three days); **and**
2. Surveillance data demonstrate increased levels of heat-related illness and death statewide; **and**
3. The National Weather Service predicts that hot and humid conditions are likely to continue for several days in a large proportion of the state.

An **Emergency** will be canceled when the heat indexes in a large proportion of the state fall below 105° for 48 hours and the National Weather Service predictions indicate a low probability for the return of severe conditions for the following 48 to 72 hours.